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ABSTRACT

A case study was conducted in which a teacher followed the progress of a first grade boy over the course of a semester, collecting samples of his written work and observing his interaction with peers. The teacher came to understand how the boy expressed his uniqueness in his writing, and how important it is for all students to be allowed to use their knowledge and express their ideas, interests, and style in a natural setting. If these conditions are present, children become good writers because writing makes sense to them. Several of the boy's writing samples are provided. (ARH)

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by

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Explorations in Making Meaning: A Case Study

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All individuals have an innate desire to make meaning of their world. Children enter first grade with this quest for meaning but also with unique ways of making meaning. Each individual has his or her own experiences, interests, needs, and hopes, and proceeds in literacy at different rates. It becomes necessary as a teacher to provide conditions in the class environment that will allow continuity in the child's learning. This involves allowing the child to build on what he or she already knows, values, and finds interesting.

The following case study involves a little boy named Adrian, who was six years old when I first met him in my first grade classroom. Over the course of a semester, I collected samples of Adrian's written work and observed him closely in class as he interacted with his peers. Adrian lived on a farm, and his interests were closely tied to his home and farm experiences. Adrian interacted daily with adults (i.e., farmers and veterinarians) who were keen observers of nature and who did work which involved physical action. Adrian learned a great deal from these adults. He reflected his home experiences, his own love of nature and farming, and his own observational and action-oriented strategies in his writing and classroom actions.

Through studying his writing and through observing him in class, I came to know Adrian better. The topics he chose to write about, the kinds of things he discussed in his writing, the connections he made between classroom activities and his own writing, the particular stylistic forms and usages of language that he developed, and the enthusiasm that he carried into everything he did were unique to Adrian. (For a more complete discussion of how teachers can know children from the works they produce, see Patricia Carini's The School Lives of Seven Children: A Five Year Study.)

The following writings of Adrian are not transcribed because the purpose of this research was to find meaning using the children's own expressiveness as an avenue for understanding. I would like the reader to take one of the paths I took in learning about Adrian. Samples 1 and 2 were created using a key word approach to writing. Children told me one word they wanted to know how to spell and which would be included in a story they were going to write. Samples 3, 4, and 5 were created in response to topics and units that were being discussed in class (i.e., cats). Samples 6 and 7 were creative writing activities which involved the children responding to some imaginary situation.

Adrian's Writings

Adrian

Anamals

Letrs see there are hippopot. misses And monkeys that hang from trees. And there are butterfly And there are dogs that have long critters that they use for perfumin. And rabbits that have long ears. And cats that have critters that tell them if the space is wide enaf. And there are zebras that have neat stripes.

Goats

Goats give milk and some people are drink to cow milk and they haf to drink goat milk. goats are play ful. And they eat tin cans.

Adrian

Penguins

A penguin is a unusuive because they live in Antarctica and for some reasin Heyr feet dont get cold and sints have been trying to figure out why.

Adrian

A cow has ito baby nachralee. A cow chus a cub. A cow give meat calld beef at some resterons like Haretes. They give you beef sannhi A cow is a reut animal because you can milk it.

Sample 1

Adrian

Cats

Cats are smart. There are all sorts of cats. Simese is one of the kinds of cats. And thay eat mice. And when they purr and if some body is holding them you fele something that tickl-s dasint it? Some cats are chuby. And some are skinny. And some are relly fat and they don't look good. I like cats. Cats are fun. My casin has allmost 19 his cats are fun. My ather casin has 20 cats I think or is that my a-maganashon.

Sample 2

Cats

Adrian's

Adrian's cats have been living on earth four millions of years. Every cats claws can come in and out when they whant to. Except four the cheta his are all ways out. I don't know why but it is intest ing. every cats body is built fuerbu nting. cats whiskers are feelers they tell them if the space is wide enaf. cats like to eat smal insects. You can tell if a cat is a boy and a girl by looking at the botum. cats are really really graceful.

Sample 3

Crayfish

The crayfish has a exoskeleton The exoskeleton is like a suite of armor. But it isn't made out of steel. The crayfish has lungs so it can breeth on land. If you want to cook some crayfish put the water to 212° and they'll turn out perfect.

Crayfish have ten legs including the pinchers they're at the end of frount legs. the crayfish has feelers like cats whiskers. I just picked up the baby crayfish it's a girl. Oh god I just picked up the big one it's a boy. It's in the crustacean family.

Sample 4

Adrian Ladybugs

I like ladybugs. Ladybugs are beedles. Ladybugs hav three parts of their body the head, thorax and abdmen And their are four stages egg, larvae, pupas and adult A ladybug is a insect. It is a meat eatting anamal The ladybug is round. The ladybug has an exoskeletor like the armadillo and crayfish The ladybug has six legs. The ladybug can hear, touch, smell, fly, eat aphids and lay eggs. And ladybugs can play dead just like possums. And when they da play dead And an anamal comes. It throws some yellow stinky stuff

Sample 5

Hi! my name is Adrian clown I'm a augusts clown I have big-big feet I'm a clown because I like to make people laugh. Sometimes I'm riding a unicycle And you know what? I went to Pv clown school. That's the greatst clown school in the world because character clowns auguste clowns, white face clowns learn there. So if you want to be a clown, go to Pv clown school And this is how to get in. Pick up the peice of paper and writ ya Phone number, addres, zip coad, first and last name. So be a clown.

Sample 6

I caught a tiny leprec
I was looking for a leprechaun
because it was st Patrick's day.
The leprechaun that I caught
has the cutest suit it had
green-yellow stripe and a green
shamrock. My leprechaun is smaller
then my hand. I caught him in the
sink he was trying to get away
but I didn't let him get away.

I held him in my hand really
tite so he wuadin't get away. I
lernt something new wen it is dark
the leprechaun can't do magik.
he told me his name he said
it was pikmik and he said oops
I told you my name. I brock
the leprechoun law now I have
to grant you thee wishs.

Sample 7

Key Word Writing (Samples 1 and 2)

Farm life experiences were reflected in the writing Adrian did when using key words. He had security in knowing about many animals, and because of this focus, he continually wrote about animals. At first he generalized about many animals (first example of Sample 1), but then he began to search for new knowledge about familiar animals. He was motivated by his interest to read and write about specific animals. Because it was a practice to share writings, Adrian's interest spread to the class as a whole. His enthusiasm radiated and sparked others to read and write about animals. Many children began to write about pets, farm animals, and wild animals.

Adrian's writing always reflected the audience that he had in class. He related personal experiences, and acknowledged that the reader had had similar experiences. When he stated in Sample 2, "And when they purr and if some budy is holding them you fele something that tikels doesn't it?" he wants to know if this is a true experience for the reader. When the stories were shared among the class many of the children could not believe that his cousins had nineteen and twenty cats. This provided the avenue for discussion on how farmers sometimes have that many cats and for what purpose. The children's reaction affected Adrian and the next time I read his work he had added the sentence, "I think or is that myamaganashon." It became apparent that Adrian's peers had a direct effect on the way he expressed his meaning.

Topic Writing (Samples 3, 4, 5)

After the class had engaged in extensive readings about cats, they became engaged in drawing cats, writing about cats, and creating kitty chatter skits. I always included fictional readings in my units because some children gain deeper meaning through this avenue.

Adrian's writing (Sample 3) shows his ability to contrast the cat to the cheetah. He found meaning in finding unique things about animals. In his first key word writing on animals he wrote that cats had whiskers to tell them if the space is big enough. This point had been also verified through our reading on cats. Adrian emphasized this point again in his newest text because he found it fascinating and it had personal meaning for him.

Because the gender of an animal is an important consequence on a farm, Adrian's explanation of how you can tell the difference between a male and female cat is well understood. I have also wondered if the spelling of the word insects (insex) had focused him into writing about the sex of animals.

The topic of crayfish (Sample 4) evolved when a little girl brought two crayfish to the class for a day. Because I did not have a lot of knowledge about crayfish we listed things we would like to find out. We then documented information from what we observed in class, and we made comparisons and contrasts to familiar animals. Because our library did

not have much information on crayfish I used the encyclopedia for information. The information seemed to be very scientific and difficult so I explained to the children the source was too difficult for us. The children asked that I continue to read the information. It became apparent to me through the children's writings that they had grasped concepts I did not think they were able to grasp.

Adrian had a fascination with the words "exoskeleton" and "crustacean." He not only learned what the words were, but also learned how to spell them. Adrian's writing again shows the form he was beginning to take in most writings. He engages in comparisons such as "a sute of armor," and "the crayfish has feelers like cat's whiskers." Because children in the class had discussed how they had experience seeing lobsters cooked, Adrian made the assumption the crayfish too could be cooked under the same conditions. He again directly talks to his audience and explained to them how their crayfish can turn out "perfeckdow." Through his writing, his emphatic language tells the reader he had actually picked up the crayfish. When Adrian examined them for gender, he used size to determine which crayfish was female and which one was male. Adrian's writing had become as expressive as he is in all class activities. I believe the writing Adrian did evolved to the level of competency documented because he always had a personal meaning and he had desire to express this meaning.

I also became aware of the connections he was making with the conventions in writing. He began to use the possessive, contractions, and more effective punctuation. He also began to use commas in a series, spelled scientific words, and organized his thoughts masterfully for a seven year old. Each day I couldn't wait to read what he wrote. All of this happened because he was learning skills in the context of real writing.

Adrian's meaning making became more visible with each piece of writing. There were underlying ideas which connected all of his writing. The studying of one animal led him into assumptions and comparisons with another. Although his writing on ladybugs (Sample 5) is not as personalized as others, he continues to assume that since a ladybug has a shell it is similar to the crayfish and armadillo and has an exoskeleton. It completely amazed me since we did not bring this up in discussion.

Creative Writing (Samples 6 and 7)

Because many of the children at our school were planning to attend the Shrine Circus in Grand Forks, our teachers thought it would be great to have a school-wide unit. Through discussions among the classroom teachers, certain classes became involved in studying certain aspects of the circus. We then decided to have a school circus in the gym depicting the outcome of the study.

Two third-grade classes and my first-grade class engaged in learning about clowns. Our class read books, made huge tagboard clowns, and engaged in clown drama. Then we came together with the third graders and shared our knowledge. The third graders reported that there were three

distinct kinds of clowns: the auguste, the character clown, and the white face clown. Each of these types of clowns went to school to learn how to do acts portraying their culture. We then pretended Prairie View School was a clown school and we performed class clown acts.

To culminate our activities I told my children that their beautiful clowns in the hall would like to tell their thoughts. I asked the children to write what their personal clown was thinking. Adrian not only classified his clown according to the distinctive characteristics, but he also advertised that Prairie View Clown School was the greatest in the world (See Sample 6). The quality of Adrian's writing showed me that when children are provided with natural and authentic reasons for writing they learn about the world and how to express themselves in the world.

The holidays during the school year always brought on excitement. I felt it was important to tap this enthusiasm and create conditions which would encourage an aesthetic response in the children. For Saint Patrick's Day I gathered literature that discussed the leprechaun theme. After reading stories about leprechauns I asked the children if they would like to catch a leprechaun. They enthusiastically responded that they would but it would be impossible to do so since leprechauns were make-believe. I then asked them how many would like to pretend. Again the response was unanimously in favor of a pretend situation. I then told the children of the pretend idea. I stated that leprechauns just loved spearmint leaf candy and if each of us would eat one piece of spearmint leaf candy the leprechauns would smell our breath and come into the school. Then we could tiptoe up to one and catch it. There was one rule, however, that we must each follow or the leprechauns would disappear: We must eat our candy and tiptoe about catching our leprechaun without making a sound; otherwise, wham!, the leprechauns would disappear.

The children all caught a leprechaun without making a sound. I then asked them what we could do with them. They said we could put them in a jar and observe them. I needed to visually see the children's leprechauns as I am sure they did so this created our next project. Each child placed his or her leprechaun in their pocket while they went about drawing their leprechaun. We then placed them between waxed paper, ironed them, and cut them out in the form of a jar. The end product was twenty-seven little leprechauns sitting in jars looking at us. The children were elated and asked if they could write how they caught their leprechauns.

The enacted curriculum created the impetus for Adrian to create the story he wrote. Adrian's writing incorporated some of the same features that had been evident in previous writings. He used descriptive expression, incorporated comparisons, and had a personalized style as if he were truly talking to his audience. He also extended his story creatively by adding the part about the leprechaun breaking the leprechaun law. I also wondered if the three wishes that were to be granted were taken from a previous story read in class called, Three Wishes.

Conclusions

At this point I know that my actions have a direct relationship to the achievement of my children. When I provide conditions that allow them to use their knowledge and express their ideas, interests, and style in a natural setting, children produce good writing because writing makes sense to them. I feel that because of my in-depth study of Adrian's learning I have also become an equal learner in the process of coming to know. My instruction now proceeds more logically because it is tied more directly to the children's learning. Although Adrian was one of the most competent students in the classroom, I feel that maybe by looking with Adrian through his eyes I now know how to respond more sensitively and intuitively to other children. As a researcher my one wish would be that you, too, could visually see Adrian with his piles of books, folders of writings, lists of words he intends to learn to spell, and his unique personal way of expressing meaning.

Within our community of learners, Adrian was one of twenty-seven children searching for meaning to organize his world. His being there had such an important consequence on the learning of all others. His manner of doing things, his enthusiasm, and his values influenced all of us. As the year ended Adrian was involved in writing a hard cover book. His choice of topics, ducks, did not surprise me. Adrian had chosen a topic we had not extended in class, but he had the ability and skill to find information on his own about his personally chosen topic. Adrian proceeded to write his book and make beautiful illustrations. When the book was completed and the last day of school was upon us Adrian was still hoarding books on ducks and finding new meaning.

Shirley Stein is a first grade teacher at Prairie View School in Devils Lake, North Dakota. She recently completed a Master's Degree in Reading Education at the University of North Dakota.

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